

# The teaching of Christ and the Antichrist in the thought of Matthias Flacius Illyricus

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## Abstract

*The teaching of Christ and of the Antichrist have a central place in Flacius's theological thinking about the church. In his struggle for the truth of the Gospel and the Word of God, Flacius points to the Antichrist and his teaching, which is opposed to the pure Word of God. In this article we will first define terms and provide an overview of biblical teaching about the Antichrist. After that we will outline the theological thoughts about the Antichrist in the time of the Reformation. Flacius's theological thoughts about the Antichrist, as well as Christ's versus Antichrist's teachings, are taken from his works, A Brief Overview of the Faith of Jesus Christ and of the Antichrist (Breves Symmae Religionis Iesu Christi, & Antichristi, per Matth. Flacium Illyricum), A Paper Against Papal Primacy (Scriptum contra primatum papae, ante annos 100. compositum. Item, Matthiae Flacij Illyrici de eadem materia), and The Catalog of the Witnesses of Truth (Catalogus testium veritatis), as well as from gaining insight into his other works. In his deliberations, Flacius joins the majority of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers, as well as the numerous gospel preachers in previous centuries, emphasizing that the Word of God is the only and supreme authority in the church. With a strong emphasis on the authority of the Bible, Flacius attempts to challenge the pope's authority and primacy, thus strengthening the Protestant churches, which were founded during the Reformation, and to weaken the Roman Catholic Church, led by the pope. By comparing the papacy with the Antichrist, Flacius calls the hesitant to turn to God, accept the teachings of the Bible, reject all human teachings and traditions, separate themselves from the Catholic Church, and join the*

*Evangelical Church, whose teaching relies solely on the Word of God.*

*Key words: Jesus Christ, Antichrist, Church, Matthias Flacius Illyricus, Bible, pope, Reformation, authority*

## **Introduction**

The Antichrist is the name for a person, or group of persons, who are opposed to God and His purposes (Blevins, 1991, 63). The phrase can mean both “against Christ” and “instead of Christ.” The idea of the Antichrist as the greatest enemy of God and Messiah is present in the Bible in the OT and NT eras, in between them, and was often emphasized in church history. Centuries-old questions were asked once again during the Reformation: who or what is the Antichrist? Is the Antichrist one person? Is the Antichrist a group of people, a nation, or a power? Has the Antichrist already come? Is he already present? If not, when will he come? What are the signs of his coming?

In his deliberations about the Antichrist, Flacius refers to the Bible, i.e. the Scriptures<sup>1</sup>, as well as numerous historical sources about the witnesses of the truth, who had been proclaiming the teaching of Christ and were opposed to the teaching of the Antichrist. This is why we begin this article with biblical teaching about the Antichrist.

## **The Bible about the Antichrist**

The word “Antichrist” (Gr, ἀντίχριστος, *antihristos*) only appears directly four times in the New Testament; he is mentioned by John the Apostle as the one who will come at the end times, and whose spirit is already present in the world.<sup>2</sup>

1 The text uses NASB translation.

2 Following are passages from John's texts which mention the word “Antichrist”: 1) “Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrist have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour.” (1 Jn 2:18). 2) “Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the [a]Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.” (1 Jn 2:22-23). 3) “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.” (1 Jn 4:2-4). 4) “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist.” (2 Jn 1:7).

However, the idea about God's greatest opponent is found both in the Old and New Testaments. The first prophetic notion of the Antichrist is found in Genesis 3:15, where God said to the serpent (i.e. Satan): "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall [a]bruse you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." Christ is the seed of woman, while the Antichrist is the seed of Satan and the Devil (Dufield and van Cleave, 1987, 536). The Old Testament does not provide the full picture of the Antichrist, because Christ was not yet revealed, but it does provide basic notions about him in the descriptions of the opposition between individuals or nations toward God. Opposing God's kingdom means opposing God. Bad people, who were notorious for their wickedness, have been called "the sons (i.e. people) of Belial (Beliar)" (Heb. *belial*: worthless, useless) (cf Deut 13:14; Judges 19:22; 20:13; 1 Sam 1:16). The unsuccessful conspiracy of the people against the Anointed One of God is a hint of the notion of the Antichrist. In the Book of Daniel we find a story about an evil leader, who will oppose the Lord, and His people Israel. This evil leader is portrayed as a Northern king (Dn 11:40), who will come with a great army to destroy peoples, persecute the righteous (Dn 7:25), and sow death (Dn 8:10). The smaller horn (Dn 7:8-21) seems to be referring to the ultimate enemy of God. Furthermore, the portrait of this "king of the North" (Dn 11), this personification of evil, has helped significantly in shaping the New Testament person of the Antichrist (Blevins, 1991, 63).

The New Testament is much more clear when speaking about the Antichrist. Jesus Christ warned His disciples about the false Christ, who will try to seduce even the elect (Mt 24:24; Mk 13:22). He comes in his own name, and the Jews accept him (Jn 5:43). The idea of the Antichrist can also be seen in the phrase "false Messiah" (Mt 24:24; Mk 13:22).

In 2 Thessalonians Paul describes the enemy of Christ as the one who despises law. His names - the man of lawlessness, and the lawless one (2:3; 2:8-9) - hark back to Dn 7:25, where the small horn attempts to change the time and the law. The Antichrist is coming, "in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved" (2 Thess 2:9-10). The Antichrist takes for himself the exclusive right to deity (2 Thess 2:4) and seduces many with his miracles. The Antichrist will perform miracles with the aid of satanic power, and many will worship him as God (Hubard, 2007, 23).

One of the Antichrist's names - the son of destruction (2 Thess 2:3; cf Jn 17:12) - is indicative of his destiny: Christ will slay him with the breath from His mouth and the splendor of His coming (2 Thess 2:8; Rev 19:15, 20; cf, Isa 11:4). The Antichrist is a personal climax of the rebellion principle, which is already secretly active as the secret of lawlessness (2 Thess 2:7). When the hand of God,

which guards law and order, is lifted, this spirit of satanic lawlessness will be incarnated in the Man of Lawlessness (Hubard, 2007, 24).

In his epistles John uses the words antichrist and antichrists, but they do not refer to one powerful evil leader, but rather to false teachers who deny the incarnation of Jesus Christ (1 Jn 4:3) and His divine nature, thus denying the true nature of the Father and the Son (1 Jn 2:18, 22). In 2 Jn 7 the antichrists are those who deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

Revelation provides us with a complex portrayal of the apocalyptic beast (Rev 13), which shows us that “the beast symbolizes earthly power, a nationalistic spirit opposed to God which will be embodied in the great demagogue, the Antichrist” (Hubard, 2007, 24).

There were many attempts during history to identify the Antichrist with persons who held great power, and who persecuted Christians. Many people thought that Nero and Diocletian were the Antichrist because they proclaimed themselves divine and forced people to worship them as gods, and when Christians persisted in claiming that they only worshiped the God Jesus Christ, they were persecuted in blood. Most church fathers believed in a personal Antichrist, and his identity depended on whether they interpreted the “mystery of lawlessness” in a political or religious sense. Some medieval theologians who were persecuted by the Catholic Church, as well as most of the Reformers, identified the Antichrist with individual popes or with the papacy in general. However, all those identifications proved to be incorrect, says Grudem, and it is possible that on the world’s stage an even worse “man of lawlessness” will appear, who will undertake unprecedented persecution of true Christians, and only Jesus will be able to destroy him upon His second coming. Therefore, Grudem concludes, although we cannot consider all persecutors of Christians throughout history to be the Antichrist, many of them were indeed predecessors of the Antichrist who is yet to come (Grudem, 1994, 1103).

Whether ideally or symbolically speaking, Hubbard concludes, the Antichrist is an eternal personification of evil, which cannot be identified with just one nation, institution, or individual (2007, 25).

### **Theological thoughts about the Antichrist during the Reformation**

The medieval papacy provided sufficient facts for a well-based portrayal of the papacy as the Antichrist, and 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers usually identified the papacy and certain popes with the Antichrist.<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther believed that it was the

3 Catholic author Anthony Maas reminds of two works by Cardinal John Henry Newman on the subject of the Antichrist. The first work was *The Patristic Idea of Antichrist*, while the other is *The Protestant Idea of Antichrist*. For more details, see Maas, 1907.

papacy, and not individual popes, that was the Antichrist. A similar attitude was held by other reformers as well, and it was given form in certain confessional documents. For Jean Calvin<sup>4</sup> and Martin Luther the Antichrist was both the papacy and Islam: the papacy was the western Antichrist, while Islam was the eastern Antichrist. Calvin referred to them as “the two horns,”<sup>5</sup> while Luther called them “the two legs” of the Antichrist (WA 53, 394f).

Referring to the pope as the Antichrist was an old tradition. Florentine Reformer Girolamo Savonarola used the phrase “Antichrist” to refer to Pope Alexander VI Borgia. In his *Catalog of the Witnesses of Truth*, Vlačić was the first to make this tradition publicly known, along with statements made by Joachim Calaber, bishop Florentin, Heinrich of Herford, early Franciscans, Hayabalins, John Wycliff, Jan Hus, and Luther. The pinnacle of talking about the papal Antichrist took place during the pontificate of Paul IV, when the phrase “Antichrist” was the most frequently used attribute when referring to the pope (Olson, 2010, 309).

One of the most influential works of the Reformation that was intended for simple folk<sup>6</sup> was the brochure *Passional Christi und Antichristi*, which is believed to have been illustrated by Lucas Cranach Sr. (1472-1553), and the follow-up text ascribed to Philipp Melancthon. In May 1521, twenty-six woodcarvings were produced for the brochure; it was published in 1521, and was published in nine editions in the same year. Cranach selected thirteen topics which he illustrated in coupled illustrations: on the left was an illustration from the life, teaching, and work of Jesus Christ, and on the right was an illustration from the life of the Antichrist, portrayed as the pope.

Almost all leading Reformers spoke about the papacy as the Antichrist. Anthony Maas (1907) lists the continental Reformers who believed the papacy to be the Antichrist. Among them were Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Philipp Melancthon, Martin Bucer, Theodore Beza, Georg Calixtus, Johann Bengel, and Michaelis. He joins them with the English theologians Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley, Hooper, Hutchinson, Tyndale, Sandys, Philpot, Jewell, Rogers, Fulke, Bradford, King James, and Lancelot Andrewes.

Pointing to the papacy as the Antichrist, with theological thoughts and ser-

4 In his work *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin mentions the phrase “Antichrist” thirty three times.

5 “Lyke as Mahomet saith ty his Alcoran is ye souveraine wisdom, so saith the Pope of his owne decrees: For they be the two hornes of Antichrist.” (*The Sermons of M. John Calvin upon the Fifth Booke of Moses called Deuteronomie*, translated by Arthur Golding, first published in London, 1583, from a facsimile reprint by Banner of Truth Trust, 1987.)

6 During the Reformation in Wittenberg and Nuremberg, Lutheran artists published a series of posters and brochures, mocking the pope, the clergy, and numerous non-biblical beliefs in the Church at the time.

mons of the Reformers, are confessional documents of the Lutheran Reformation tradition.<sup>7</sup> For example, the Smalcald Articles, in the second part, fourth article about the papacy, emphasize:

This teaching shows forcefully that the Pope is the very Antichrist, who has exalted himself above, and opposed himself against Christ because he will not permit Christians to be saved without his power, which, nevertheless, is nothing, and is neither ordained nor commanded by God. This is, properly speaking to exalt himself above all that is called God as Paul says, 2 Thess. 2, 4. Even the Turks or the Tartars, great enemies of Christians as they are, do not do this, but they allow whoever wishes to believe in Christ, and take bodily tribute and obedience from Christians... Therefore, just as little as we can worship the devil himself as Lord and God, we can endure his apostle, the Pope, or Antichrist, in his rule as head or lord. For to lie and to kill, and to destroy body and soul eternally, that is wherein his papal government really consists... The Pope, however, prohibits this faith, saying that to be saved a person must obey him. This we are unwilling to do, even though on this account we must die in God's name. This all proceeds from the fact that the Pope has wished to be called the supreme head of the Christian Church by divine right. Accordingly he had to make himself equal and superior to Christ, and had to cause himself to be proclaimed the head and then the lord of the Church, and finally of the whole world, and simply God on earth, until he has dared to issue commands even to the angels in heaven... (*The Smalcald Articles* 2,4,10-13).

During their intense spiritual struggle for the truth of the Gospel as written in the Bible, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers emphasized strongly the teachings of the Holy Scriptures, particularly the teachings of Jesus Christ. Upon comparing the life and actions of the Roman Catholic Church at the time with the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, most Reformers concluded that the Church leadership as led by the pope were practically enforcing the teaching of the Antichrist. This belief was also adopted by Matthias Flacius Illyricus (Croatian: Matija Vlačić Ilirik), a Reformer and renowned theologian of the Lutheran Reformation tradition, originally from Croatia.

### **Flacius on the Antichrist**

In forming Flacius's attitudes about the Antichrist, studying and adopting Scriptural truth as well as the activity of Pope Paul III were extremely important (1534-

7 In the *Book of Concord*, the phrase Antichrist is found 24 times, most often when comparing biblical teaching about the Antichrist, and the papacy as the fulfillment of the Antichrist's teaching and activity.

1549), as was the activity of the Inquisition, and especially of the inquisitor Giovanni Della Casa, who started the process against the Vergerius family in 1544, and the work of inquisitor Annibal Grisoni, who worked in Istria. In 1542 the Inquisition incarcerated Friar Baldo Lupetino, who was Flacius's cousin, who preached in the cathedral on the island of Cres,

that God did not ordain some for hell, that prayers for the dead are of no use to their souls, that there is no Purgatory, and that indulgences are futile, as the Pope and priests only receive them for the money, that Christ saves people through His own merits, that Sunday prayers must be offered to God alone, and that the Church has no right to demand fasting (Olson, 2010, 64).

In his desire to help Lupetino, Flacius visited Venice in 1543, carrying a request for the Doge Pietro Lando for the acquittal of Lupetino, signed by the leaders of the Schmalkaldic League, the dukes of Hessena and the Electorate of Saxony. He failed at his task, in spite of strong support from Saxony and Hessen. Instead, he discovered all the brutality of the Papal Inquisition there.

In one of his earliest published works, *Ein Prophetische Buspredigt für diejenigen, So den erkanten und bekanten Christum mit dem Antichrist und seinem hauffen verfolget haben, oder noch verfolgen* (Magdeburg, 1547), Flacius analyzed the pope's works and referred to him as the Antichrist. Flacius became convinced that the Lutheran Church's teaching was the Word of God itself, and he embraced it with his entire soul during his studies at Wittenberg University. "On the other hand," as he wrote and published in 1549 in *Entschuldigung Matthiae Flacij Illyrici, geschrieben an die Universitet zu Wittemberg der Mittelding halben*, "I've come to the conclusion that the Pope is the true Antichrist, and I have cursed and condemned the Pope as the Antichrist, as well as his fallacies and abuses, with all my heart" (Olson, 2010, 76).

Before long, Flacius' works were included in the List of Forbidden Books (*Index librorum prohibitorum*), and Peter Paul Vergerius, Jr., who published the *Index* in his work *Catalogus Haereticorum* (1556), proudly added "ex Istria" to the name of Matthias Flaccius Illyricus.

Flacius's theological deliberations on the Antichrist, as well as Christ's and the Antichrist's teachings, will be deducted based on three of his works, as well as insight into his other works. The first of the three works, *Breves Symmae Religionis Iesu Christi, & Antichristi, per Matth. Flacium Illyricum* (*A Brief Overview of the Faith of Jesus Christ and of the Antichrist according to Matthias Flacius Illyricus*<sup>8</sup>)

8 In this paper I am using the work, *Breves Symmae Religionis Iesu Christi, & Antichristi* in its Latin original, and partly in the Croatian translation by Dubravko Furlan, adapted for the occasion.

was published in 1550 in Magdeburg.<sup>9</sup> It was divided into two parts. In part one, pages 2 through 6, Flacius outlines Christ's teaching. In part two, pages 7 to 14, he outlines the Antichrist's teaching.

The second work, *Scriptum contra primatum papae, ante annos 100. compositum. Item, Matthiae Flacij Illyrici de eadem materia*, was published in 1550 in Magdeburg. This work was first published by Flacius in 1550, and after that in 1551. In the *Scriptum contra primatum papae* Flacius uses biblical, theological, and historical arguments to prove that the papacy was not instituted by Christ, and that the pope has no primacy over other bishops. In his work, Flacius also published two papers against the teachings of the government and the pope's godless tyranny. In his second paper, which was written during the time of the Council of Basel (1431-1449), he uses the Bible to provide brief and well-supported evidence to the claim that the pope has no primacy over other bishops, further using historical evidence to show how the pope, as the Antichrist, won over the primacy. He also proves that Peter did not have primacy, and even if he did, it does not mean that the pope should have it. Furthermore he explains that it is not expedient to place any man, no matter how godly, at the head of the entire church of Christ.

The third work, *Catalogus testium veritatis (The Catalog of the Witnesses of Truth)* has been published in a series of editions. The first edition was published in 1556 in Basel. *The Catalog of the Witnesses of Truth* was published in the Croatian language as part of the "Croatian Latinist" edition (1960) as a selection of more than a hundred of Vlačić's witnesses.<sup>10</sup> This translation, which is used in this paper, was re-issued in Zagreb in 1998.

Flacius faithfully adopted the teaching about the Antichrist from the Bible, as well as from Luther's teachings, life and work. He not only adopted the biblical teaching through reading or relaxed meditation, but after a crisis of faith and through personal experience. He claimed to be a weathered Christian (Olson, 2010, 61). In his twenties, he said that Luther's best years were behind him. "Here, this is our old, honorable father in Christ," he wrote, "a true man of God and a true Elijah, who fought faithfully and happily as a valiant hero against the Antichrist, and all kinds of heresy and Baals. Today or tomorrow, our Lord God will take him away from here" (Olson, 2010, 61).

In discussing the teaching of Christ and the Antichrist, Flacius starts with a biblical truth: "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Tim 1:15). He also adds that all the prophets testify that there is no other name under the heavens thro-

9 The work contains 14 pages of text, approximate size 9.87x16.13 cm.

10 This selection from Flacius's *Catalog of the Witnesses of Truth* was translated from the text in the Frankfurt edition from 1666.



ugh which people can be saved. Although he uses numerous passages from the Old and New Testaments to develop his teaching for discerning truth from a lie, Christ's teaching from the teaching of the Antichrist, and true and false prophets, his teaching is based on passages from chapter 2 of 1 John, 2 Thessalonians (2:3-13) and Daniel (11:36-39).

### ***Christ's teaching***

In his *Brief Overview of the Faith of Jesus Christ and of the Antichrist*, in the chapter about Christ's teaching Flacius emphasizes the basic biblical teaching about salvation in three parts. In the first part he talks about the condition of man, which is changed by God through the proclaimed Gospel. The preaching of the Gospel at Christ's command begins with teaching about conversion, forgiveness of sins, and admonitions to stop sinning. Christ's teaching includes the teaching about the one triune God, creator of the world; about the fall of the first man; about sin; and about people who have been conceived and born as sinners, according to the witness in Psalm 51. Since birth, there is only evil in the heart of man; he refuses to accept what is God's; he despises and hates God, and is incessantly working against God. These numerous evils are an insult to the righteous God, who explicitly demands full and perfect obedience from man: the outward actions and the inner reason, will, and emotions. Preachers encourage people to sincerely repent of their sins, to fear the wrath of God and eternal destruction, to stop doing evil and to seek ways to attain forgiveness of sins and avoid the wrath of God, as well as eternal punishment (Flacius, 1550, 3).

In the second section he points out forgiveness of sins and salvation in Jesus Christ. As preachers

preach the Gospel, they proclaim the absolution of sins through Christ, and that God has so loved the world, that he incarnated His only begotten Son and gave Him over to the most disgraceful death, so that all who repent and call upon the Lord in faith, would be saved. They say that He is the only Lamb who takes away sins, and that there is truly no other name under the heavens through which people can be saved, and furthermore, that He is the only way, truth, and life; the only bread who has come down from heaven; that all sinners who are hungry for God's righteousness should come to Him, the shepherd and giver of life; that all who are tired and burdened should come to Him, as well as those who are thirsty, but have no money, for He will let them drink; that He is, following the suffering and resurrection, the only intercessor between God and man; that He's the only one speaking for miserable sinners, and mediator, and that only through Him we can and must, in our misery, confidently come before the throne of divine Majesty. And whatever we ask in His name in faith, we will surely attain it. Furthermore, Christ is the only head of the Church, who rules it and defends it from the Devil and the World, and that He will ultimately lead it into eternal bliss (Flacius, 1550, 3-4).

Thirdly, after repentance, conversion, and salvation, Christians are called to a different life, i.e. to holy living. Christians should strive with all their efforts to stop sinning:

In a third place they teach that once we've sincerely repented of our sins, and once we've denounced those shameful deeds and evil deeds of former life, and once Christ's graciousness has delivered us from sin, wrath of God, and from destruction, as if from the Cross itself, and when we become regenerated for new life by accepting the Holy Spirit and become equipped for good deeds, we may no longer be so frantic in our passions so as to return to our own vomit, and to wallow in the mud like pigs, to return in slavery to the Devil of our own volition, and call upon ourselves the wrath of God and eternal destruction: instead, we are to engage all our efforts in watching ourselves in order to desist from sinning, and to serve God faithfully in obedience to the rules in His Word (thus neglecting human habits, which are futile in our worship to God), glorifying the Heavenly Father through ourselves, and we will no longer be falling under the wrath of god (Flacius, 1550, 4-5).

"We are," Flacius emphasizes, "throughout our entire lifetimes, running around in this circle, which consists of these *three parts of Christian teaching*, until we are finally, upon being deprived of this body, blissfully moved to be with the Lord Jesus" (1550, 5).

### ***Antichrist's teaching***

Flacius takes Christ's teaching as written in the Bible and contrasts it with the Antichrist's teaching, which was summarized in the teaching and life of the Roman Catholic Church at the time. Antichrist's teaching consists of all teachings and practices invented by people, and which are not based exclusively on the Scriptures and on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

On the contrary, the ministers of the Antichrist teach that Christ has justified us once and for all through baptism, and that we have been clothed in the white robes of innocence. And if we have committed a sin after that time, they say we've lost these white robes: that we have, indeed, broken and forfeit the ship, i.e. the power and the benevolence of baptism and of Christ. Therefore, if we wish to be rescued from the wreckage, we have to grab hold of the board of penance, (and so they return us from the Gospel back under the Law), i.e., that we need to be contrite enough due to the massiveness of our sin, which is impossible, that we need to have sufficient confession of all sin and circumstances - which is also impossible - and sufficient compensation, and then that Christ makes up for the sins before the baptism, while we need to provide compensation ourselves for the sins committed after the baptism, which is also impossible to do through obedience to the Decalogue; instead, we owe God a different kind of obedience. Therefore, that we should be obligated to do deeds which God has not commanded (in this way, they are moving the

Church of Christ from both the Gospel and the Law to ordinances of men), such as celibacy, voluntary poverty, pilgrimages, endless repetition of prayers, whipping, fasting, and all other voluntary or willingly suffered torments and punishments of the body (Flacius, 1550, 7-8).

As part of the Antichrist's teaching, there is a strong emphasis on the teaching of man's justification through works, the teaching about mediation in salvation,<sup>11</sup> selling indulgences and masses, Purgatory, cleansing after baptism, as well as other means,<sup>12</sup> remedies and ways in which to avoid hell and enter the Kingdom of God.

The teaching that the pope is the head of the church, "that he is a mixture between God and man; that he has power in heaven, earth, and purgatory; that he is infallible; that all should obey him if they want to be saved, while he doesn't have to obey anyone, even if he would drag all the countless peoples into eternal destruction in chains," Flacius considers to be the Antichrist's teaching, and he emphasizes:

In this sense, the Antichrist shamelessly and criminally pulls miserable people away from Christ, the only mediator and Savior, and from the divine law not only towards the wickedness of common people, but also towards certain places, bones, clothes, I don't know whose hoods and anointing, and magically consecrated waters and salts, and other empty and truly dead elements of the world, which are no better than the Egyptian and pagan deities, to their own destruction and to despising Christ (1550, 9-10).

According to Christ's teaching, the Devil should be fought with the sword of the Spirit, i.e. the Word of God, and the shield of faith (Flacius, 1550, 6), and according to the Antichrist's teaching, we should fight with the sign of the Cross and

11 „This, if we ourselves are unable to provide compensation, or if we indeed refuse to do so, this means nothing, because there's money for others to do it for us. There is, namely, the Most Holy Pope, who sells indulgences in abundance and also numerous charters. There are Saint (Franciscan, Dominican, and countless other mediators), through whose mediation, purchased from the monks, we can be saved. There are various priests who sell Masses and solemn funerals, whose dirges will undoubtedly rescue us from Purgatory. There are also many alliances of monks and nuns, who have the ability to pronounce numerous salvific utterances, and if they sell them to us and pour them into us, there is no doubt that we will be able to fly into Heaven with, oh, such purity“ (Flacius, 1550, 8-9).

12 „In the same way, if one wears the habits, whether before or after death, this seems to be cleansing the sinners, just as baptism had cleaned them earlier. We also have magically consecrated water and salt that destroy sin, and become salvation and life when dispersed. There are also Lambs of God made of wax, consecrated plants and candles and thousands of other remedies and ways to go in order to be rescued from hell and to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The last remedy is the fire of Purgatory; once we're sufficiently cooked, cleansed, and washed from all the burden of dirt, we will surely enter the Kingdom of Heaven“ (Flacius, 1550, 4-5).

blessed water (Flacius, 1550, 9).

In describing the Antichrist's teaching Flacius uses numerous Bible passages,<sup>13</sup> and in describing the Antichrist's teaching he uses passages from 2 Thessalonians (2:3-13)<sup>14</sup> and Daniel (11:36-39).<sup>15</sup> In the brackets, Flacius adds his own explanations and comments to his translation of the Bible text. (To help distinguish between the biblical passages from 2 Thess 2:3-13 and bracketed comments, the comments have been printed in italics.)

Before the final judgment there will be a falling away (*i.e. people will turn from Christ to the Antichrist*) and the man of sin and the son of destruction will be revealed (*i.e. the Antichrist*), who is the adversary, and who will rise up against all that is called God or holy (*i.e. he will also dare to issue ordinances against the revealed Word and commandments of the almighty God in regards to communion in both opportunities as well as numerous other things*) and set himself up to sit in the temple of God and pretend to be God (*i.e. willfully destroying faith in the one, and instituting the other, blindly binding or absolving consciences with his charters and ordinances, all the while incessantly shouting: "The Church of Christ was built on me: what I bind or unbind based on my judgment, it shall be bound or unbound in Heaven. You should listen to me rather than the beloved Son of the living God."*) Do you not remember that I spoke of this while I was still with

- 13 When using the passages, Flacius often omits the book or verse references in the Bible, which is why finding them requires knowledge of the Bible.
- 14 In order to compare Flacius's translation of the Bible passage and the contemporary translation according to the Jerusalem Bible, we bring the latter: "Never let anyone deceive you in any way. It cannot happen until the Great Revolt has taken place and there has appeared the wicked One, the lost One, the Enemy, who raises himself above every so-called God or object of worship to enthrone himself in God's sanctuary and flaunts the claim that he is God. Surely you remember my telling you about this when I was with you? And you know, too, what is still holding him back from appearing before his appointed time. The mystery of wickedness is already at work, but let him who is restraining it once be removed, and the wicked One will appear openly. The Lord will destroy him with the breath of his mouth and will annihilate him with his glorious appearance at his coming. But the coming of the wicked One will be marked by Satan being at work in all kinds of counterfeit miracles and signs and wonders, and every wicked deception aimed at those who are on the way to destruction because they would not accept the love of the truth and so be saved." (The Jerusalem Bible)
- 15 The passage in the NASB version says, "Then the king will do as he pleases, and he will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods; and he will prosper until the indignation is finished, for that which is decreed will be done. He will show no regard for the gods of his fathers or for the desire of women, nor will he show regard for any other god; for he will magnify himself above them all. But instead he will honor a god of fortresses, a god whom his fathers did not know; he will honor him with gold, silver, costly stones and treasures. He will take action against the strongest of fortresses with the help of a foreign god; he will give great honor to those who acknowledge him and will cause them to rule over the many, and will parcel out land for a price."

you? And even now you know what it is that is holding him, so that he would only appear in his time. Truly, the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but there's still someone to hold him back, until he is removed. Then, the Lawless One (*the Antichrist*) will be revealed. The Lord will slay him with the breath of His mouth (*i.e. by His Word, as claimed by Luther*) and will destroy him with the glory of His arrival (*i.e. the remains of Antichristianism shall remain until the last day*); him who, through the acts of Satan comes with full power, false signs and wonders, and all the unjust pretense (*i.e. such a different appearance, wonders and miraculous Satanic illusions, that the papacy is full of*) of those who are being destroyed (*which is the shelter of papists*) because they have not accepted the love for truth and become saved, (*just like in these times the innumerable papists and those who have fallen away from us despise the truth with maniacal wantonness, or even persecute it*). That is why God sends them seductive activities so that they'll believe the lie (*i.e. to start belauding the order, the discipline, the ceremonies, and the pagan splendor of the Antichrist, and thus turning to the Antichrist*) and become condemned, all those who have not believed the truth (*i.e. clearly expressed Word of God*), but have opted for injustice, (*ie., godless antichristianism*). However, we need to thank God incessantly, because He has called us to salvation through the sanctification of the Spirit in faith and into the truth (Flacius, 1550, 11-13). (*paraphrased Bible text, translator note*)

Flacius compared the passage in Daniel 11:36-39 to the papacy and followed it up with comments (in brackets) based on the lives and activities of the popes.

The king will do as he pleases, and he will exalt and magnify himself above every god (*i.e. the Antichrist loves being above all political leaders, that the Scripture refers to as gods*) and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods; (*i.e. he will dare to twist the Word and faith in the almighty God with his ordinances*) and he will prosper until the indignation is finished, for that which is decreed will be done (*just as the Popes have been successful in the misdeeds they've been undertaking for a long time now, both in the area of faith and in the area of politics, until the Pope took his kingdom to the very pinnacle of this absolute godlessness*). He will show no regard for the gods of his fathers (*just like the Pope doesn't teach that salvation is possible in Christ alone, like the fathers, but through multiple other saviors and mediators*) or for the desire of women (*i.e. the godly and God-ordained or marital, but will give himself over to fornication and will become defiled with the lusts of Sodom*) nor will he show regard for any other god; for he will magnify himself above them all. But instead he will honor a god of fortresses, (*i.e. many temples which look like fortresses and protected buildings, which is the meaning of the word "Maoz"*) a god whom his fathers did not know; he will honor him with gold, silver, costly stones and treasures. (*early bishops of Rome didn't think that faith is found in rocks and fortresses that are to be worshiped, which are precisely where the Pope places faith, adorning them with gold, silver, precious stones, bread, and other costly things, as experience tells us*). He will take action against the strongest of

fortresses with the help of a foreign god; (*i.e. he will expand his worship of pagan idols and ceremonies*). He will give great honor to those who acknowledge him and will cause them to rule over the many, and will parcel out land for a price (*i.e. the Antichrist will magnify his own priests*) (Flacius, 1550, 13-14). (*Bible passage taken from NASB*)

## The Pope as the Antichrist

In order to support his claim that the pope (*i.e. papacy*) is the Antichrist, Flacius cites Scripture, as well a series of witnesses who have preached and lived scriptural truth throughout history.

For Flacius, the Scriptures are the strongest and most trustworthy witness to the truth (1998, 15), and they openly accuse the pope of being the Antichrist. He argues this by interpreting certain Scripture passages. Flacius believes that the pope has, with the aid of new rituals, new mediators, and protectors or sponsors of the church, snatched away Christ's priestly dignity and power (Vlačić, 1998, 15). Based on 1 John 2, Flacius claims:

The Antichrist denies that Jesus is the Christ, *i.e.* he's robbing him of the Kingdom and priesthood. He robs Him of the Kingdom and denies His exclusive headship of the Church, while at the same time he makes others into protectors and helpers of the godly and of the Church. He robs Him of priesthood, while denying that only the beloved Son should be obeyed, that it is He alone who takes away the sins of the world, and wants to put himself as mediator between God and men (1550, 1).

"The Holy Scriptures," Flacius points out, "do not only oppose the Pope and his fallacies in terms of outlining an opposing teaching, but also by explicitly stating that the Antichrist will come, by clearly stating that it is the Pope himself, and by describing his fallacies and frenzy. Saint Paul also teaches that the Antichrist will sit in the temple of God, where he will proclaim his power and enforce his tyranny. And the temple of God is His entire church... And who else has exalted and magnified himself, and made himself more prominent, if not the Pope?" (Vlačić, 1998, 14).

It is, however, certain that the pope was posing as the vicar of Christ, and that he took for himself a power greater than the power which the Son of God took for Himself. In fact, Christ was always obedient to the Scriptures and He claimed that all He was doing and suffering was for the fulfillment of the Scriptures. The pope, on the other hand, claimed that he was able to provide forgiveness, going against the words of Paul the Apostle and Evangelist, and that he was able to turn a wrong into a right, and vice-versa (Vlačić, 1998, 14).

Paul the Apostle clearly pointed out when the time of the Antichrist's appea-

rance would come, Flacius believes. It would be when the Roman Empire was at the brink of its demise, which indeed happened, because it was around that time that the pope began to rear his head and pile up one iniquity on top of another (Vlačić, 1998, 14).

Flacius interprets the opening words of 2 Peter 2 as Peter's prediction and description of his own heirs and their prelates. Peter foresees that they will deny the Lord who has redeemed them, and this is what, to Vlačić's knowledge and conviction, the pope and his followers did in fact do in wanting to redeem themselves and save themselves with their sacrifices and merits, as well as by selling made-up fairy tales about wonders, apparitions, and powers of the saints, etc. (Vlačić, 1998, 14).

Flacius compares the passage in 2 Pt 2:1-19 with the "Roman Antichrist and his miserable sons, who even display their filthy feet for kings and emperors to kiss them, and who at their whim appoint and depose kings and emperors from the throne, who excommunicate and absolve from sin, and who godlessly release their own minions from the oath of faithfulness." (Vlačić, 1998, 14)

Flacius ascribes the characteristics of false teachers and false prophets as seen in 2 Pt 2:1-19 – "they will be given to luxury, they will condemn things they do not understand, their hearts will be trained for robbery, that they will have the appearance of godliness, but will be like rainless clouds, and that they will flail about pompous and elbow-long words" – to the pope and his tawdry cardinals and prelates, as well as the rest of his priests." (Vlačić, 1998, 15)

According to Flacius, the prophet Daniel also teaches that the Antichrist will not care for the love of women, i.e. honorable marriage, and that he will forbid marriage and the use of food. And the pope has done both, because he forbade his priests from marrying and he generally argued that such a way of life is impure, fleshly, and less pleasing to God (Vlačić, 1998, 15).

Flacius believes that John the Apostle gave clues as to the person and place of the Antichrist's rule in Revelation: the pope is the Antichrist, and Rome is his capital city (1998, 15).

In his work, *Scriptum contra primatvm Papae (Paper Against Papal Primacy)*, Flacius offers a summary of thoughts about the Antichrist, in which he clearly shows the difference between Christ the Lord and his vicar, the pope.

Christ has, indeed, excluded the earthly kingdom;  
but the vicar strives for it.  
Christ refuses the kingdom He was offered;  
the vicar denies that it was refused.  
Christ refuses claims that He was appointed judge on the earth;  
the vicar assumes the right to judge emperors.  
Christ submits Himself to the emperor's emissary;  
the emissary of Christ puts himself above the emperor, and the whole world.

Christ rebukes those who strive for primacy;  
the vicar seeks primacy over the entire Church.  
We read that, on Palm Sunday, Christ rode on a donkey;  
the vicar is not happy with pompous riding, unless the emperor himself  
holds his horse's reins.  
Christ gathered the discordant Jews and pagans into one kingdom of the Church;  
the vicar has often set the once harmonious Germans against each other in  
frequent rebellions.  
The innocent Christ endured injustice patiently;  
the guilty vicar cannot stop inflicting injustice to the Church and the  
Kingdom (Vlačić, 2009, 169-170).

At the end of his text regarding the Scriptures as the witness to the truth, Flacius concludes: "I wanted to share briefly about certain passages in the Holy Scriptures, which seem to have been consciously written and directed against the pope. Besides, the entire Bible is directed against him, just like our churches and teachers have abundantly proved in voluminous book, and just like it's becoming more and more evident in their writings and sermons." (Vlačić, 1998, 16)

In the *Catalog of the Witnesses of Truth*, Flacius makes note of all those who have, "prior to Luther, witnessed for the truth of Christ and against the fallacies and the rage of the Antichrist in any way, and who spoke against the adversary's misapprehensions, dereliction of duty, and a debaucherous way of life" (Vlačić, 1998, 8). He refers to the many popes and their associates as Antichrists, who are godless, filled with lust, revilers, heretics, idolaters, and tyrannic persecutors of the church and of the truth (Vlačić, 1998, 13). According to Flacius, the corruption of the church first occurred after 600 AD, after the strengthening of papal power, and due to an everyday increase in fallacies and abuses there was less and less of former sincerity and blamelessness every day (Vlačić, 1998, 8). However, despite the rule of the Antichrist during the times of the cruel reign in the temple of God, Flacius often points out that there were always seven thousand soldiers who have not "bowed their knee before this Baal, or more precisely, before this abomination of desolation." (1998, 2)

Flacius outlines the testimonies of popes themselves about how the pope is not inerrant as his flatterers and admirers keep shamelessly claiming, saying that he is incapable of error (1998, 37). In reference to Pope Siricius (cca 400 AD), who forbade and condemned marriage for priests, he not only called him the Antichrist, but quite openly a fool. About the Roman bishops he states that they have "insolently, brazenly, shamelessly, godlessly and in the most uneducated way abused the Holy Scriptures, only to be able to achieve the worthless dreams which came out of their heads." (Vlačić, 1998, 27)



Flacius points out how John Baleus in his *Catalog*<sup>16</sup> confirms that he has usually referred to the priests, who do not teach God's commandments, but those of men, as servants of Satan and of the Antichrist, thieves in the night, robbers by day, destroyers of morality, butchers of souls, and angels of darkness. (Vlačić, 1998, 154)

He often quoted from books about the Antichrist which were published during history. For example, he stated that around 1380 Matthew the Parisian wrote an extensive work about the Antichrist in which he argued that the pope is the Antichrist. It is the work of the Antichrist that tales and figments of man's imagination dominate the church; that statues and false relics are worshiped left and right; and instead of Christ some worship one set of saints and protectors, and some worship others. In his work, *About the Coming of the Antichrist (De adventu Antichristi)*, Jacob of Meissen wrote that in 1366 the prebendary of Prague, Milič, taught that the Antichrist had already come (Vlačić, 1998, 258-259).

Through his writings, Flacius calls on the indecisive to make up their minds and accept the pure Word of God as it is written in the Bible and obeyed in the lives of many Reformers and Reformed churches. When he compares the Roman Church with the great prostitute from Revelation 18, he calls all those who are zealous about any good cause: "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not participate in her sins and receive of her plagues; for her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities." (Rev 18:4-5)

In his work, *Etliche Hochwichtige Ursachen und Grunde, warum das siche alle Christen von dem Antichrist...*, Flacius lists six reasons why true believers should be separated from the pope and from his followers. In his sixth and last reason Flacius points out that, in many church writings, in the divinely inspired Word, in the prophecies about the future and in special characteristics of the papacy, it has been exhaustively and thoroughly confirmed that the pope and his prelates and priests are the real Antichrist, that his kingdom is the real Babylon, the inexhaustible source and mother of all disgusting idolatry (Flacius, 1570).

Debates about the pope as the Antichrist and about the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church which opposed the Word of God had multiple purposes during the Reformation. First, they were supposed to help interpret the Word of God and to confirm it as the only authority for Christian beliefs and life and for the work of the church. Along with emphasizing the authority of the Holy Scriptures, the debates abundantly disputed the pope's authority and the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Second, they were supposed to encourage believers

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16 John Baleus *Illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorum* (1548; "Of Great Britain's Illustrious Writers"); the revised and much-expanded *Scriptorum illustrium majoris Britanniae catalogus* (1557-59, reprinted 1977; "Catalog of Great Britain's Illustrious Writers")

into contextual meditation and the application of the Scriptures. The Reformers had in numerous debates interpreted the Word of God and applied it in the context of the local parish and in the context of the Roman Catholic Church with the pope at its head. Third, the discussions were supposed to encourage believers to leave the Roman Catholic Church, because it teaches and applies the Antichrist's teaching, and to join Lutheran churches, which preach and apply in their life the pure Word of God as it was written down in the Holy Scriptures.

In his deliberations, Flacius joins the majority of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers, as well as the numerous gospel preachers in previous centuries, emphasizing that the Word of God is the only and supreme authority in the church. With a strong emphasis on the authority of the Bible, Flacius attempts to challenge the pope's authority and primacy, thus strengthening the Protestant churches, which were founded during the Reformation. By comparing the papacy with the Antichrist, Flacius calls the hesitant to turn to God, accept the teachings of the Bible, reject all human teachings and traditions, separate themselves from the Catholic Church, and join the Reformed Church, whose teaching relied solely on the Word of God.

## **Conclusion**

The teachings of Christ and of the Antichrist have a central place in Flacius's theological thinking about the church. For Flacius, the Word of God is the only truth which should - and which can - be the source of all teaching for Christians. In many of his works Flacius strived to proclaim the pure Word of God. Since the Word of God has been often neglected and distorted in the Roman Catholic Church throughout history, and especially in the Roman Curia, based on the Holy Scriptures Flacius identifies the papacy with the Antichrist. In his struggle for the truth of the gospel and the Word of God Flacius points to the Antichrist and his teaching, which is opposed to the Word of God. His expositions are firmly and uncompromisingly rooted in Scripture and are abundantly supported with historical testimonies. In his deliberations Flacius joins the majority of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers, as well as the numerous gospel preachers in previous centuries, emphasizing that the Word of God is the only and supreme authority in the church. With a strong emphasis on the authority of the Bible, Flacius attempts to challenge the pope's authority and primacy, thus strengthening the Protestant churches, which were founded during the Reformation. By comparing the papacy with the Antichrist, Flacius calls the hesitant to turn to God, accept the teachings of the Bible, reject all human teachings and traditions, separate themselves from the Catholic Church, and join the Reformed Church, whose teaching relied solely on the Word of God.

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Stanko Jambrek

## Kristov i Antikristov nauk u Vlačićevoj misli

### Sažetak

Kristov i Antikristov nauk zauzimaju središnje mjesto u teološkoj misli o Crkvi reformatora Matije Vlačića Ilirika. U borbi za istinu evanđelja i riječi Božje Vlačić ukazuje na Antikrista i njegov nauk koji se suprotstavlja čistoj riječi Božjoj. U izlaganju prvo se definiraju pojmovi i daje pregled učenja Biblije o Antikristu. Zatim se ukratko naznačuje teološka misao o Antikristu u vrijeme reformacije. Vlačićevo teološko promišljanje o Antikristu te Kristovu i Antikristovu nauku izvodi se iz njegovih djela *Kratki pregled vjere Isusa Krista i Antikrista* (*Breves Symmae Religionis Iesu Christi, & Antichristi, per Matth. Flacium Illyricum*), *Spis protiv papina primata* (*Scriptum contra primatum papae, ante annos 100. compositum. Item, Matthiae Flacij Illyrici de eadem materia*) i *Katalog svjedoka istine* (*Catalogus testium veritatis*) te uvida u ostala njegova djela. Vlačić se svojim promišljanjima pridružuje većini reformatora šesnaestog stoljeća, kao i brojnim propovjednicima evanđelja u stoljećima prije njih, naglašavajući kako je Riječ Božja jedini i vrhovni autoritet u Crkvi. Uz snažno naglašavanje autoriteta Svetog pisma nastoji osporiti autoritet i primat pape te time ojačati protestantske crkve utemeljene u vrijeme reformacije i obesnažiti Rimokatoličku crkvu na čelu s papom. Prispodobom papinstva Antikristu Vlačić poziva neodlučne da se obrate Bogu, prihvate učenje Biblije, odbace sva ljudska učenja i predaje, odijele se od Rimokatoličke crkve i pridruže crkvama reformacije čiji je nauk čista Božja riječ.